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ABSTRACT

One component of the Computer Based Project for the Evaluation of Media for the Handicapped focused on the effects of introducing instructional media into classes for the educable mentally retarded. The study used the methodology of participant observation, whereby researchers: 1) gained entry to the classes, 2) established rapport, 3) recorded notes, 4) analyzed data and developed hypotheses, 5) made a final analysis, and 6) issued a report. Four major findings resulted. First, teachers exhibited a need for increased insights into and guidelines for media utilization. Second, the study showed that instructional delivery systems must conform to the teaching styles and schedules for individual teachers. Third, observation revealed that resources must be tailored to the teacher's needs, as these were perceived by the teacher. Fourth, teachers viewed their teacher peers as invaluable resources. The researchers concluded that to be successful, media-based programs must provide the teacher with system support and maintenance, must operate under procedures which conform to teachers' patterns, and must use peer influence and support to widen effective media usage. (PB)

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RESEARCH REPORT #7313
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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE FOR STUDYING TEACHERS AND CLASSROOMS

Richard Lewis

ABSTRACT

This paper describes participant observation, a multidimensional research technique which may be useful in helping educational researchers to better understand the classroom situation. The discussion includes: a rationale for the use of participant observation, an outline of the process, and the findings of a participant observation study conducted by the Computer Based Project. The author concludes that the technique appears to be extremely valuable as an evaluation device at any level of education.

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SPECIAL REPORT No. 7313
COMPUTER-BASED PROJECT for the EVALUATION of MEDIA for the HANDICAPPED

Title: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE FOR STUDYING TEACHERS AND CLASSROOMS

BY: Richard Lewis

BACKGROUND

The Computer Based Project for the Evaluation of Media for the Handicapped, based on contract #OEC-9-423617-4357 (616) between the Syracuse (N.Y.) City School District and the Media Services and Captioned Films Branch, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (United States Office of Education) for the five year period July 1, 1969 through June 30, 1974. The major goal is to improve the instruction of handicapped children through the development and use of an evaluation system to measure the instructional effectiveness of films and other materials with educable mentally handicapped (EMH) children, in-service training and media support for special teachers, and studies related to the evaluation process and the populations used.

The Project has concentrated on the 600 films and 200 filmstrips from the Media Services and Captioned Films (BEH - USOE) depository; however, specific packages from Project LIFE, various elementary math curricula, and selected programs from Children's TV Workshop have also been evaluated. The evaluation model used requires that: 1) objectives of materials be specified and written; 2) instruments be constructed to test and measure effectiveness; and, 3) children be the major sources of evaluation information. A number of instruments and methodologies are employed in the gathering of cognitive and affective data from 900 EMH children and 80 special teachers to make the effectiveness decisions. Over half of the EMH population can neither read or write; therefore, a unique Student Response System (SRS) is employed, consisting of a twenty station G.E.-1000 SRS which can be operated in a group or individual recording mode and is connected to a remote computer system. The computer capabilities consist of remote telephone connections to the Rome (N.Y.) Air Development Command, the Honeywell time-shared network, and the Schenectady (N.Y.) G E Research and Development Center; and batch mode capabilities of the Syracuse City Schools, Syracuse University, and various commercial sources.

In-service and media support activities provide on-the-job training for teachers, teacher aides, equipment, and materials to the special teachers in the city schools. The research activities have centered around investigations and special problems related to the development of the evaluation model. The four major areas considered are: 1) testing effects, 2) captioning effects, 3) special student characteristics; and, 4) evaluation procedures validation.

Documentation of the major activities appear in the five annual reports and the 600 evaluations prepared on materials used. Staff members were encouraged to prepare special reports and the attached paper is one of these. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Computer Based Project, the United States Office of Education, or the Syracuse City School District, and no official endorsement by any of the agencies should be inferred.

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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE FOR STUDYING TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM

Teachers work amidst a variety of conflicting pressures and constraints. What they teach and how they teach is a result of daily events and decisions. In order to affect change in the classroom, the classroom situation must be understood. This paper describes a multi-dimensional research technique which may help educational researchers to understand the classroom situation.

Participant observation is a sociological technique with much to offer education. The paper starts by introducing participant observation and describing some of the rationale behind it. Then the steps of the process are described in detail. Finally, a participant observation study of elementary school classrooms is described.

Participant observation refers to a research approach in which the major activity is characterized by a prolonged period of contact with subjects in their own settings. During the encounters, data, in the form of field notes, are unobtrusively and systematically collected. An example of this approach would be a situation in which a researcher visits classes for the mentally retarded for long periods of time and acquaints himself with his subjects. The researcher becomes part of the situation. He behaves in an nonalienating manner to the people he is studying and becomes part of their world, gaining rapport with them and trying to view the world through their eyes. He tries to determine

the perspectives of the people in the situation he is studying.

The purpose of the research method is to develop an understanding of the setting and social relationships in the situation being studied. Proponents of the approach suggest that the only way to accomplish this task is to immerse oneself in the situation to be studied. (Bogdan, 1972). The task, then, of the participant observer is to paint a picture of the situation he wants to analyze. As a result, few, if any, hypotheses are formulated at the beginning of the study. At the onset, it is the task of the observer to enter the situation and determine to the best of his ability, what processes are occurring in that situation. Later in the study, the observer may well begin to formulate some hypotheses about what is occurring. At the outset, however, no formal hypotheses are usually stated.

Steps in the Process

In the participant observation study described here six steps are usually followed. Each step will be briefly described and then followed by an account of what happened in the present study.

1. Gaining entry. In this step of the study, the researcher, having identified a problem he wishes to study, must gain entry to the desired situation. If the proposed study concerns classrooms, the researcher must find a school system, principals and teachers willing to cooperate. Often to gain entry, the researcher must compromise his neutrality to some degree and be willing to offer some information if asked to do so.

For instance, in our study, the Computer Based Project had identified the problem to determine the extent of media use in the 'experimental classrooms' set up by the Project. The Project hired three participant observers under the direction of Dr. Robert Bogdan, Professor of Special Education and Sociology at Syracuse University, to conduct the study. Arrangements for observations of teachers were then made by the observers, the Project and cooperative teachers. Most teachers in the study indicated that they wanted more feedback on their teaching styles, etc. from the observers. In addition, the observers were required to submit periodic reports to the Project describing what they saw.

2. Rapport In participant observation, once the observer has gained entry to the research situation he must develop rapport with the subjects in their settings. The method of developing rapport is different for every person but the goal here is to gain the trust and confidence of all subjects in the situation. If the situation is a classroom, teachers and students, as well as principals, specialists, teacher aides and maintenance staff may be of assistance. The observer must form a good relationship with all of the subjects he is studying.

The observers in the Project study began developing rapport by meeting with the teachers outside their classrooms. The observers described something of themselves, what they were looking for in the classroom and in general attempted to gain the trust of the teacher. Each observer was instructed to tell teachers that his/her place in

the classroom was as an observer and not as an evaluator. The observer assured the teacher that any information which he discovered while part of the study was confidential. Teachers were also assured that all reference to their identity would be removed in the reports to the funding agency or other groups. Most observers also agreed to give the teacher some feedback on the processes they observed, but the observers tried to stay away from communications value judgements. For instance, if a teacher asked what an observer thought of a technique or strategy the observer made a noncommittal statement. Sometimes, however, a value statement was unavoidable.

3. Recording the notes In participant observation, after the observer leaves the situation, his task is to remember and to transcribe everything he remembers about what happened in the classroom;. Conversations are reported verbatim and events are described in every detail. To develop these skills, the observer begins observing for short periods of time and increases his observation time as his memory skill improves.

The observers in the Project study started by observing two or three 15 minute sessions a week and then gradually increased their observation time to one hour or two. For each hour spent in the classroom, about 10 to 15 pages of notes were recorded. In practice, remembering the events of the observation period proved to be relatively simple. However, remembering everything a teacher said during a thirty-minute interview proved to be more difficult.

4 Analysis of data In participant observation, data are constantly analyzed. Observers continually watch for trends or events which tend to reappear in the observing situation. By this process, hypotheses are generated. An observer may notice for instance that before a classroom fight, there is usually a period of teacher involvement with another task and general frustration in the classroom. The frustration is often indicated by unrest and loud talking. The observer would watch this trend more closely to determine if his hypotheses are tenable. He may also directly inquire about the situation through interviews with the parties involved.

The purpose of the present study was to determine the effect of introducing instructional media into eight classrooms for the educable mentally retarded in a local school district. The observers were instructed to watch what happened in the classrooms and to report every event. As the study progresses certain trends began to appear. The observers discovered, for instance, that the ways teachers defined media were governed in many cases by the condition of the equipment, the timely arrival of the material, and the teacher's ability to operate the machinery. Further data collection was guided by the roughly formulated trends which appeared in the early stages of data collection.

5. Final analysis After each observation period all data are scrutinized to determine the hypotheses and trends which are tenable and those which are not. As long as additional data is required further observation and/or interviewing is carried out

In this study, the observers formulated about 30 hypotheses from the data they had collected. The data were then scrutinized to determine those hypotheses which were tenable.

6. Report The final step in the participant observation research project is to generate a report describing the processes and events which have been observed in the classroom. The report includes short quotations and vignettes from the observers' data to illustrate the point being made.

In the present study, a report was released to the funding agency which dealt with 14 findings regarding the exprimental classrooms. The report also identified other problem areas with the experimental classrooms. Of the 14 findings, four will be presented here.

Findings

1. Teachers need new insights into media utilization and guidelines for incorporating everyday objects into the classroom. In addition, the instructional value of a medium lies in how it is perceived by the teacher and the students.

For the purposes of this study, media were defined as any resource which aided the teacher in any type of instructional activity. In this definition, media included not only film, filmstrips and television but paper bags, boxes and other objects used in teaching.

It was discovered that only a few teachers saw the potential use of everyday objects to teach a concept or idea. One such teacher used her sack lunch as an educational medium:

> While the children sat in a circle around her, the teacher held up her paper lunch bag and said, 'I have something else to share. It's a vegetable, it's long and skinny, and ... it's orange. Can you guess what it is?' Danny correctly guessed a carrot. 'It came from a vegetable that's green and has leaves that peel off.' She made a peeling motion with her hands. 'The name of this vegetable begins with a 'C'.' She made the sound of a hard 'C'.

From this example, we can see that a teacher who perceives the instructional value in one simple object, a sack lunch, may be achieving objectives similar to those of a sophisticated electronic gadget.

Teachers who did use instructional materials such as films, used them as enrichments or to fill in the time. They were used as instructional frills to break up the day or as baby-sitting devices to let the teacher do another task. We observed teachers who started films with the phrase 'Lights, camera, action', indicating that they perceived films as entertainment, largely irrelevant to the real business of 'teaching' and 'learning.' Seldom did we observe instructional media being integrated into the classroom routine centering on the mastery of the three R's. However, books, dittoed sheets and workbooks were used considerably.

There were many possible explanations for the teachers' definitions of media. For one thing, the equipment frequently broke down when it was needed. Time was needed to integrate mediated materials into the classroom schedule and many teachers didn't have the time for this type of instructional planning. Other teachers felt that even programs which were supposed to individualize instruction needed constant supervision. One teacher put it this way:

> They come up with some neat devices, but the trouble is that you need someone to supervise them, and who has the time to do that?

To summarize this section, an agency interested in innovation must be willing to keep hardware in repair and provide support personnel so teachers will use media. Without these efforts, the use of media will get lip service and little else.

II. Instructional material delivery systems must conform to the teaching styles and schedules of individual teachers.

Because of the nature of their task, teachers tend to establish rigid schedules and teaching styles. In order for an organization interested in media development to encourage innovation, the schedules and styles of teachers must be considered.

However, teaching styles and schedules are often the function of elements outside the teacher's sphere of control. One teacher complained about the red tape in the school system:

> We have to order the materials we want in the fall for delivery the following school year. Then we're never sure of what we'll need and whether we're even going to get what we ordered.

Also in reference to supplies, one teacher complained, "I still don't have the books I need". Another said with regard to requests for special help for children:

> You call in a request for a psychologist to come down, and it's three months before one comes around to administer a test to a kid.

One teacher explained how her plans for a field trip fell through because of red tape:

> To get a bus you have to arrange a request several weeks in advance. We did. Got the bus all lined up. The kids were all excited about the trip, and they got more and more eager as the day got closer. Then, the day before the trip, they called up the school and said that they couldn't release a bus. All the buses were needed because there was going to be some kind of conference held at another school.

An important factor in determining whether a teacher will attempt to fit a resource into her schedule is whether or not the teacher feels that the resource will arrive in her class when it's supposed to arrive and whether it will work when it's supposed to work. Our field notes are loaded with teachers' references to various times when equipment didn't work, broke down during operations or functioned poorly.

III. Resources, human and otherwise, must be tailored to the perceived needs of the teacher.

What constitutes helping a teacher from the innovator's point of view may not be helping her at all. In this case, the Computer Based Project thought that it would be helping a teacher by providing media and human resources. However, the teachers did not feel they were being helped. One teacher put it this way:

> "You know," said a teacher, "it's not a lot of materials and programs I really need. What I need is someone to come in here and show me what to do --- someone to come in here and look at this." (She pointed to her lesson plan book.) "Somebody who can take a look at this and say, 'Well, what you should be doing here is this and what you can do here is this ...' That's what I really need: an expert who can show me how I can use my time better, show me how to schedule things so I don't waste so much time."

The teachers, in most cases, wanted and needed help, and they have some general (and in some cases, very specific) ideas about what that help should be. If they can get this help, and if it takes into consideration their schedules and problems, they want the help. Otherwise they would rather be left alone. For instance, the Project provided graduate assistants, students from Syracuse University, for the teachers. The teachers could use the students any way they pleased. In most cases teachers did not know what to do with this professional help.

> I thought he was supposed to come in and work with a couple of the children on the Structure of the Intellect.
>
> I gave him some ditto masters to run. I hope he wasn't insulted, but he didn't say anything so I didn't worry.

The graduate assistants, like so many other "aids" the teacher was given were sometimes unreliable and had their own schedules at the university and elsewhere. Hence, the teacher was forced to adjust her schedule to that of the assistant. The assistants, then, like the media were sometimes more trouble than they were worth. Once more we found an instance of a teacher being unable to use a valuable resource because of circumstances not under her control. In addition, the graduate student program, like the media innovation program, failed to take into account the teacher. The "aids" that were planned by experts to aid in instructional innovation proved to be almost worthless to teachers.

IV Teachers perceive each other to be invaluable resources. Agencies interested in change must give this factor serious consideration.

The most important part of the program for some of the teachers were the weekly meetings that were held, for the meetings presented the opportunity for them to get together and informally exchange information and opinions about ideas and materials:

> "The thing I liked best about the program," said one teacher, "was the interaction with the other teachers. There I found out that other teachers were having the same kinds of problems I was."

Throughout our field notes we found examples of teachers using each other as resources and critics of various instructional materials. They asked each other about a particular film or filmstrip and if they thought it was good. Such information was viewed with a high degree of credibility compared to information from other sources. As one teacher explained:

> Teachers really know what's going on. They go through the same thing each day. They're on the same wave length. They can speak to the heart of the matter. They know what works and what doesn't.

We found that if one teacher recommended an instructional material to another, there was a high likelihood that the second teacher would try out that material herself. Informal exchanges like these were valuable to the teacher because she felt she did not have time to devote to previewing materials or pre-testing them.

Some teachers used each other as resources in broader ways --- teaming up, for instance, to show films and manufacture materials. Through such cooperation, the time and effort that went into planning, preparation and the actual use of instructional materials could be shared.

Most teachers participating in the Project would have welcomed communication channels which facilitated the sharing of information and activities.

Summary

This paper has introduced the reader to the technique of participant observation, delineated some of the steps in the procedure and then demonstrated how the technique was applied.

The technique appears to be extremely valuable as an evaluation device at any level of education. Some general references about the technique and some specific applications of the process are provided in the bibliography. The reader is encouraged to consult the items listed below for more information.

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